

## **Semiotics, decision sciences and value systems – Greimas contributions to the emergence of XXI century meaning-making challenges**

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### **Résumé**

Semiotics, as the science of signs and of sign systems, has been present throughout the development of Western thought. This journey since Antiquity saw a full blown semiotic presence in the XX century, through the works of Saussure and Peirce. Yet it was Greimas who developed a complex and sophisticated method of semiotic analysis that expanded its horizons of application to practical and applied reality. Greimas' work enabled the study of the deep level meaning-making structures, which are present in wide apart human endeavours. More importantly, this pioneer work opened the gates to the narrative and discourse related processes that are present across different manifestations of reality. It is precisely this de-codifying power that discloses semiotics importance to contemporary society contexts, where turbulence and incertitude force new approaches to emerge and create new opportunities for thought and action. Decision sciences, such as management, economics and political science, are structured according to the prevalent value systems that inform and mould their intrinsic rationality. The taken for granted assumptions that characterize each culture, framed by specific and long-term time a space settings, are themselves active structures, which condition and influence the argumentative narratives behind each decision-making science. Consequently, first, semiotics is mandatory as an explorative methodology in the context of decision sciences; second, semiotic methods provide a powerful reading matrix for dealing with the complexity of contemporary societies; and finally, Greimas' oeuvre offers a synthesis of the structured, objective and scientific based aspects of analysis and the open dynamism of the subjective and intuitive world of sense-making. Greimas pin-points the under structures behind cultures and value-systems, enabling the repositioning and re-foundation of such instances, thus intensifying their signification power. The power of ideas, and their propagation and evolution, work as a pipeline whose structure is offered by semiotics methods. This offering is not a ready-made package but rather a rationale that once adopted it unveils its performativity and its explanatory power.

### **Introduction**

Greimas uses blunt language to describe sophisticated argumentation. This kind of approach fits well the turbulent and complex times of contemporary societies.

“It is extremely difficult to talk about meaning and to be able to say something meaningful. In order to accomplish this adequately, the only way possible would be to construct a language that ought to be meaningless: one would therefore establish an objectifying distance, which would enable the use of a discourse devoid of meaning to be applied onto a meaningful discourse.” (Greimas, 1970, p. 7).

Ecological pressures, security issues, technology revolutions and big data phenomenon, are examples of creative tensions that expose the complexity of current reality. Within this context, decision-making sciences, which include economic, managerial and ethical governance, are instances of political and social confrontation that typify open processes of meaning-making. Capturing, interpreting, disseminating, processing and incorporating such processes in real life situations, is a challenge that may be answered by Greimas innovative work.

“The human world appears to be essentially defined as the world of signification.” (Greimas, 1966, p. 5).

The links between the narrativity, the value systems and the world of affects, of emotions and passions, is particularly relevant to present day contexts. This assumption is valid both when considering individual or institutional challenges. Even more significantly, this approach enables addressing both daily and quotidian reality, pointing to issues that tend to be taken for granted in inappropriate ways, and also it enables addressing life changing situations, limit situations, where tensions are stretched to the limit, covering social and political instances of power, of conflict and of paradox.

“What is apparent in discourse is an implicit connection, through a thousand allusions, to a *being* of the semiotic text, which is insinuated as an internal referent.” (Greimas, 1976, p. 267).

Leadership, motivation and enthusiasm, which are present in charismatic relationships and in paradigmatic situations, may be designed and redesigned, engineered and reengineered, structured and restructured using the plastic, ingenuous and creative approach of Greimas semiotics. All in all, signification and meaning-making are open processes. It is the discursive and narrative power that enables human beings to resist chaos and it is one's resistance to circumstances that best reveals the power of semiotics, power in the sense of giving evidence of the intelligibility of reality, and of human's role as active participants of that manifestation process.

## **Key principles**

The central aspect that must be highlighted is that Greimas' work is a synthesis of powerful insights that offer an evidence-based approach to sense-making. This evidence does not depend on the shrewdness of an expert interpreter but rather it is already present in quotidian life, in the simplest of human tasks. In this sense, studying Greimas is like entering the black-box of producing signification, as an ongoing instance of human existence.

"To determine the multiple forms of the presence of meaning and of its modes of existence, to interpret them as horizontal instances and as vertical levels of signification, to describe the trajectories of the transpositions and transformations of contents, such are the tasks that no longer seem like utopias. Only such kind of semiotics of forms may become, in a predictable future, as the language that enables to talk about meaning. Precisely, the semiotic form is nothing else than the meaning of meaning itself." (Greimas, 1970, p.17)

Greimas' work covers wide apart areas and the semiotic models that it proposes are an example of its plascity. The semiotic square identifies founding structures through tensional relations. It is generative and transformational semiotics in the sense that meaning is articulated through narrative and discursive based structures, though they may emerge through non-textual neither narrative forms. Schemas may capture varied sources of signification, from aesthetical experiences to passions and affects. Theory is closely embedded in practice. Enunciation is a critical instance of an empowering praxis. In other words, human beings become who they are through action, through exercising their capacities and skills, thus gaining discursive proficiency and embodying meaning, both as an individual and as a collective process.

### **Saussure's, Peirce's and Greimas' interpretation of a sign**

Saussure's sign theory argued that the relationship between the representation of the "object" and the name attributed to the "object" was a random, arbitrary, aleatory relation and that meaning was only possible from the articulation of different meanings, of systems of signs. However, Peirce proposed a triadic interpretation of the sign, where meaning emerges from the sign itself. Thus, in Saussure's sign theory, meaning is outside the sign and meaning is only possible through the relationships between different signs, that is, signs work through the establishment of meaningful relationships between different signs.

Conversely, Peirce made the sign a complete, dynamic and never ending process of meaning creation. For Peirce, each sign, in isolation, includes all the necessary ingredients to establish meaning and, most importantly, this meaning is never

completely fulfilled and it may be developed further through a continuous interpretation process. This is done through the definition of a triadic relation that works in a cycle. So there is the “object” and there is the name or image that refers to that “object”, in similar terms to Saussure’s theory. And then there is a third element, which refers to the process itself of establishing the relationship between the object or image and its name, i.e. an interpretation process. In the next cycle of Peirce’s sign theory, this interpretation process itself, becomes the “object” to be analysed, as if it were an objective reality, in relation to which, a “name” must be identified, through a particular interpretation process. In the next iteration, the new and last interpretation becomes, once again, a new “object” to be further analysed and interpreted.

This simple and almost mechanical scheme helps us to describe all signification phenomena. In intuitive terms, if we think of a literary object, such as a book or a poem, or of other artistic productions such as a piece of music or a painting or sculpture, or even photograph, drama or cinema, we may consciously experience the apparent ambiguous and paradoxical phenomena that every time we came in contact with that work of art we find new meanings, new significations and new interpretations. And, more importantly, the greater the importance of these spirals of experience and interpretation, the greater the work of art itself.

If aesthetical experiences are the ultimate, most extreme, and yet the most familiar, example of this process of signification, every single situation where human beings are active taking part in social practices, using language and establishing meanings and relationships, this same process occurs.

#### - Saussure’s sign theory –

- A sign is an *arbitrary* relation;
- Each sign needs to be *combined* with other signs in order to produce meaning.
- **Signifier** - Sounds, letters, gestures.
- **Signified** - Image or concept to which the *signifier* refers.

#### - Peirce’s sign theory –

- A sign has a *triadic* relation and is the basis of the theory of signification;
- A sign has an *inbuilt* capacity to create meaning;
- Each sign develops infinitely in a permanent *cycle*.
- **Representamen** - The physical sign that is to be interpreted; “Something that does the representing” (equivalent to Saussure’s *signifier*).
- **Object** - Image or concept (equivalent to Saussure’s *signified*).

- **Interpretant** - “A sign in the mind”; It becomes the *representamen*, i.e. the sign to be interpreted, as if it were a physical sign, in the next cycle.

In technical terms, in Saussure’s sign theory, a sign is an arbitrary relation. Each sign needs to be combined with other signs in order to produce meaning. In Peirce’s sign theory, a sign has a triadic relation and is the basis of a theory of signification. Each sign has an inbuilt capacity to create meaning and each sign develops infinitely in a permanent cycle.

In Saussure’s sign theory, there is the signifier and the signified. The signifier may be sounds, letters or gestures. And the signified is the image or concept to which the signifier refers to.

In Peirce’s sign theory, there is the representamen (equivalent to Saussure’s signifier), the object (equivalent to Saussure’s signified) and there is the interpretant, or a “sign in the mind”. The representamen is the physical sign that is to be interpreted, i.e. “something that does the representing”. The object is an image or concept. And the interpretant, the sign in the mind, becomes the representamen, i.e. the sign to be interpreted, as if it were a physical sign, in the next cycle.

It is interesting that Greimas’ structural semiotics incorporates and expands previous work. In a certain sense, it represents a wide broadening of the depth and breadth of semiotic analysis.

Indeed Greimas’ semiotics is closer to that of other semioticians, such as Eco and Barthes. From the linguistics, Greimas connected his work to Saussure, Hjelmslev, Benveniste and Jakobson. And to anthropology, through the works of Lévi-Strauss, Mauss and Dumézil, to hermeneutics, through Ricoeur, and to phenomenology through Husserl and Merleau-Ponty.

#### **- Greimas’ sign theory -**

**Starting point** – interest in capturing meaning as a process, in production, in tension; dissatisfaction with traditional reductionist approaches, which focused on classification alone (and defined morphemes as combinations of phonemes).

**Radical alternative** – to invert the process, i.e. to assume the existence of a semantic universe, composed of all possible meanings that may emerge from a community of shared meanings, through language use and participation in social practices, which includes a given culture and its value system; from this macro and super-structure level, micro and local discursive universes of meaning could be established; narrativity is the process, and narratology the procedure, of connecting and transposing textual sources of meaning to other non-textual levels, as a metalanguage.

**Basic assumptions** – meaning making implies articulation, elaboration and consubstantiation into a narrative form, as meaning is only apprehensible in a discursive form; these narrative structures are systems of meaning, which go beyond natural languages, creating the surface and the deep level of narrative forms; action, intentionality, performativity, and affects and passions, are all elements of the complex generative and transformational process of signification.

**Narrativity and the Semiotic Square** – visual and diagrammatical representation of dynamic relations that map the horizon of meaning under analysis; it is an instrument, a heuristic tool, which expands the spectrum of signification, overcomes barriers and performs border-crossing across differences and modalities in concepts within a specific cultural and language use setting.

**Layers of squares** – analysis and interpretation is potentiated by using juxtaposed squares of interrelated concepts; the semiotic square may also be use in a bi-modal fashion, in the Saussure way, and/or in a tripartite way, as Peirce's interpretation of a sign.

**Structural semiotics** – goes beyond linguistic analysis because it addresses meaning-making as an embedded and embodied instance of human's community based learning; it incorporates the phenomenological, anthropological and linguistic breakthroughs of a wide range of thinkers; it opens the ground for the exploration of a narrative analysis of a wide range of areas, from publicity to cinema, or from politics to marketing; nevertheless, the full potential of Greimas' work still has much to offer within the transversal presence of signification mechanisms in both social and natural sciences.

## **Value systems and decision-making**

The horizon of possibilities for decision-making is conditioned by worldviews and mentalities that are a function of values. Such values work in a multifactorial and dynamic interaction, in a creative tension between concrete events and idealised orientations and drives.

In times of transition, the transition from an industrial to a post-industrial society, there is a reframing of the system of values. Both repetition and continuity, as well as rejection and rupture, constitute the change and evolutionary processes that characterise societal change.

What Greimas acknowledges is a sort of under current, which orients long-term change trajectories. The acknowledgement of such under currents empowers individuals, capacitates them to respond to and to influence such dynamisms in a positive way.

“It is because I have seen, over a period of five or six years of work, that lexicology did not take me anywhere – that the units, the lexemes or signs, did not enable any kind of analysis, as they did not enable any form of structuration, neither an acknowledgement of the global sense of each phenomenon – that I understood that it is “under” the signs that things indeed happen.” (Greimas, 2000, p.XI).

Both at individual level and at institutional level, decision-making condenses the conscious and linear forms of rationality, as well as the unconscious and complex intuitive types of reasoning. Culture is the dominant thinking patterns that tend to prevail as the result of a successful learning curve. In other words, both individuals and institutions tend to repeat past successful strategies, which is a positive option in stable and predictable times. However, the greater the instability and change, the greater the need to be open and to master the process itself, instead of the result. Times of crises imply the revision and re-founding of that which is essential for each community.

“All that appears is imperfect: it hides the being, which is from where the willful-being and the dutiful-being are built, which are already a deviation from meaning. Only the appearance as a possibility – as a may-be – is merely livable. As such, it constitutes our condition as human beings.” (Greimas, 1987, p. 9).

It is interesting how Greimas’ work is able to capture both daily tasks and routines, as well as life-changing events, in order to highlight the continual presence of meaning-making instances.

“Signification may hide under each and every sensitive appearance, as it is *behind* the sounds, but also behind the images, the odours and the flavours, without as such being inside the sounds or the images.” (Greimas, 1970, p. 49).

The challenges related to the prevalent information overdose, to the novelties of artificial intelligence, to big data and to the industry 4.0 model, represent change patterns, which make the need to master the meaning-making processes an urgency across disciplinary fields. It is the age of connectivity and of the Internet of Things. Technoscience tends to dominate the ecodigital system, as opposed to the previous dominance of expert and specialised know-how. In other words, the human-machine interface is pending towards machine, and the more developed a society is, the greater is this tendency to overdo its technological drive.

However, what is crucial to highlight is that no matter the degree of technological development, underneath apparently technical decisions, there are human factors, human values, human decision-making, passions and affects. As such, semiotics becomes more and more important as it is necessary to decipher and decode societal contexts with increased levels of complexity.

## **Conclusions**

As Schleifer (2016) stresses, Greimas' project focuses on the nature of meaning or signification, rather than on the function of language.

The potential for Greimas' theory to improve human's capacity to reflect upon the way it is organised in societies, still lies largely unexplored. Though there have been numerous examples of application of structural semiotics to a wide range of areas, there is still the need to deepen the understanding of the richness of Greimas heritage. Humans live in social gatherings and the constitution of community life is also constitutive of individual's life projects. In other words, quality of life is as much an individual as it is a societal condition. Moreover, the attitude and intentionality of human communities is itself the trace of the capacity of self-organisation and of self-determination. To be able to create and to optimise the self-regulating and autopoietic systems, which are present in all human settings, is intrinsically and semiotic and a meaning-making process.

"Man lives in a signifying world. For him, the problem of meaning does not occur. Meaning is imposed, it is forced down as an evidence, as a "sense of acknowledgement" totally natural." (Greimas, 1970, p. 12).

Meaning, values and impetus for change, all share a positive overwhelming attitude, which semiotics analysis may help to potentiate. Personal and professional development, and institutional and societal development, tend to create self-reinforcing processes and capacitating mechanisms, which work as a virtuous circle. Greimas' structural semiotics is a sound scientific project, yet it also offers the potential to create spaces and opportunities for change, which may enable the best of human options to emerge. Using and exploring the present potential for action, and also expanding such potential even further, is a task that directly connects to meaning-making processes. Consequently, the urgency to improve the usability of Greimas' body of work and the need to reinforce the praxis that it proposes, is a mandate for both present and future generations to respond to. Again and again, the greater the complexity, the greater the need for sophisticated accounts of how humans make sense of the world they live in, i.e. the reality they both participate in and are an instance of its manifestation. Such is the challenge of Greimas' heritage and such is the opportunity to overcome all the obstacles in the name of common good and of a better future.

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